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SUBJECT: Mixed Reactions to Plan Colombia Cut, GOC to Lobby US Congress

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Government of Colombia's (GOC) reaction to the announcement of cuts to USG Plan Colombia assistance has been measured and has recognized fiscal realities in the United States as well as Plan Colombia's natural tendency towards reduced assistance. Still, officials have expressed concerns over reductions in eradication funding, citing high levels of coca cultivation and the need to consolidate gains under Plan Colombia. Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva plans to travel to Washington next week to lobby for sustained Plan Colombia support. A presidential candidate, and a prominent NGO analyst, inferred deeper messages, saying the cut signals disapproval of a possible third Uribe term and a shift in U.S. policy. Other analysts said the reduction should have come with an explicit message that the cuts represented success in attacking narco-trafficking organizations and that the United States has taken a decision to confront the social roots of the Colombian conflict. End Summary.

U.S. Fiscal Realities & Plan Colombia Glide Path

¶2. (U) The GOC has reacted rationally to the USG announcement of FY11 Plan Colombia reductions and emphasized that it should not be a surprise. President Uribe said the United States will continue being an ally and will not abandon Colombia. He added that two things need to be acknowledged: the U.S. budget deficit is very large -- 10% of GDP as compared to 4.5% in Colombia, and Plan Colombia has always been spoken of in transitory terms. Vice President Francisco Santos said the idea has always been that the Colombian state would progressively assume charge of the efforts financed by Plan Colombia. Diego Molano, head of the President's Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation (Accion Social), also stated the cuts were predictable and added that they did not represent a punishment for false positives or the illegal wiretapping scandals of the Administrative Department of Security (DAS).

Eradication Primary Concern

¶3. (SBU) While Uribe acknowledged Plan Colombia's realities, he also warned not to lower the guard against coca cultivation as large amounts still exist in Colombia. Uribe pointed to apparent flexibility in Washington for more manual eradication funds as a positive, since coca cultivation has transitioned from vast tracts to small parcels. Molano also expressed concerns about reductions in spending on eradication, which is a key component of the National Consolidation Plan and vital to reinforce alternative development. Colombian Ambassador to the United States Carolina Barco stated that, in light of the cut, a review is necessary to find the most effective strategy involving manual eradication and aerial spraying.

Potential Budget Impacts Downplayed

¶4. (U) Uribe affirmed that everyone is going to have to do the same with less money by being more efficient. General Freddy Padilla, Commander of the Armed Forces, said for now the cuts will not

affect the military since they can count on resources for the next six months, which they will optimize, and await the next budget in September. Molano said the cuts will not affect Accion Social's social programs, which are largely paid for out of Colombia's own national budget.

GOC Will Lobby U.S. Congress

¶5. (SBU) Despite public acceptance, the GOC plans to lobby the U.S. Congress for sustained Plan Colombia support and Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva plans to travel to Washington next week with Vice Minister Jorge Mario Eastman. Molano said the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense were covering all fronts in the United States to demonstrate the importance of maintaining the levels and priorities of Plan Colombia, with respect to cooperation in security and social development.

Adapting Counternarcotics Strategies

¶6. (U) In light of the reduction, Colombian Ambassador Barco stated that a regional counternarcotics strategy is needed that includes the United States, Mexico, Central America, and Colombia. Jairo Clopatofsky, Senator of Uribe's U party, was more pointed, saying the announced cuts go against the commitment the United States has had with Colombia to support the eradication of illicit crops, which according to him now amounts to more than 140,000 hectares. Opposition Senator Cecilia Lopez, Liberal Party, went even further saying the reduction should be a lesson in the failure of the war against drugs, and the Colombian government will now have to envision a way to assume the responsibilities of its own conflicts and put counternarcotics on the global agenda.

Presidential Candidate Faults Uribe Third Term

¶7. (U) German Vargas Lleras, presidential candidate of the Radical Change Party (anti-reelection but supportive of Uribe policies), blamed Uribe's possible third term saying the USG has clearly demonstrated that it is against reelection. He also faulted Colombian diplomacy for allowing the United States to cut assistance to its principal ally in the region.

Prominent NGO Analyst Says GOC "Disgraced"

¶8. (U) Leon Valencia, of respected think tank New Rainbow Corporation, wrote that the Plan Colombia cuts were the culmination of several signals that the GOC has been disgraced in Washington, and the United States is shifting its Colombia policy. According to Valencia, the signals have been the failure to ratify the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, rejections of an Uribe third term, calls to respect human rights, and the two critical letters sent from the U.S. Congress to Secretary Clinton. Other NGOs have been largely silent on the issue.

¶9. (SBU) Political violence expert Gonzalo Sanchez told Polcouns February 3 that he thought the cuts should have been announced with a clear message that the United States had taken a decision to attack the social roots of the Colombian conflict such as poverty and land access. Center-right security analyst and columnist Alfredo Rangel told Polcouns February 4 the cuts were understandable given the GOC's success in attacking narco-trafficking organizations. He added, however, that Colombia still needs help from the international community with justice sector reform and alternative development.

Continued Support Needed to Consolidate Gains

¶10. (U) Vice President Santos said he was in complete disagreement with criticisms that Plan Colombia has been a failure. He described the Plan as a historic success in fighting against narcotics, combating illegal armed groups and establishing governance. Santos maintained that Colombia needs continued support in security matters to consolidate those advances.
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